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Collaborative museum research with Yup'ik elders

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2005 *Ciuliamta Akluit: Things of Our Ancestors*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, with Bethel, Calista Elders Council, 448 pages.

In 1997 a group of Yup'ik elders from southwest Alaska, translator Marie Mead and anthropologist Ann Fienup-Riordan travelled to the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin to examine objects collected from their region by Johan Adrian Jacobsen from 1882 to 1883. Two products of this project, organized by Fienup-Riordan, are *Yup'ik Elders* and *Ciuliamta Akluit*. These books provide an outstanding model of collaboration with indigenous peoples for museum work, perhaps the finest publication to date. Furthermore, given the fears European museums may have about indigenous peoples trying to reclaim objects, Fienup-Riordan provides an enriching, inspiring example of what can be achieved by Native communities, anthropologists and museums through open access to collections despite unresolved cultural property issues.

Both publications are derived from translated transcriptions of the elders' discussions, which were held entirely in Yup'ik. Fienup-Riordan utilized English excerpts for *Yup'ik Elders* and extensive bilingual sections in *Ciuliamta Akluit*. According to the author, the importance of *Ciuliamta Akluit* is that it provides an opportunity to learn about Yup'ik culture from Yup'ik elders themselves and is an example of Yup'ik oratory. The purpose of *Yup'ik Elders* is to convey the positive climate of their work and so present an alternative to conflicts over object ownership. The author also describes it as an attempt to promote a new direction for anthropology,

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where anthropologists act as intercultural translators working toward cross-cultural understanding. She successfully meets these goals.

Upon turning the pages of *Ciuliamta Akluit*, a reader cannot be but duly impressed by the Herculean accomplishment of this bilingual text. After thanking contributors, translator Marie Mead clearly conveys the vital importance of their work: "The cultural knowledge and wisdom they shared is priceless and is a link for us, our young people, and future generations to our cultural history and continuity as Yup'ik people" (p. xiii). In the introduction that follows, Fienup-Riordan succinctly describes Jacobsen's collection and the project's development. The reader is introduced to the participants and to the Yup'ik people and homeland. The editing process is briefly described, supplemented at the end of the book with a detailed explanation of the Yup'ik language and translation process. Fienup-Riordan also addresses her use of "visual repatriation" to describe their work. She writes that "their primary concern was not to reclaim museum objects but to reown the knowledge and experiences that the objects embodied" and that "instead of resentment at what had been lost and taken from them, they expressed profound gratitude toward both the collectors and the museums for preserving them" (p. xxiii). She proposes that amidst struggles between museums and Native peoples over ownership of objects in museum collections, both can greatly benefit from Native elders' study of them. The following chapters prove this argument.

The book's chapters are comprised of daily research over fifteen working days at the Museum. On each day, except for the last, elders explained objects and subjects within categories covering a wide range of Yup'ik material culture and activities. This structure allows one to read chronologically or by object type. During their comprehensive discussions, elders gave information on the use and construction of items; shared memories and stories; explained the significance of an object or practice; and expressed their values and concerns, particularly regarding contemporary life. In the last chapter, they comment on their experiences on the project, issues in their communities and their hopes for outcome of their work.

Although deemed a companion to *Yup'ik Elders*, *Ciuliamta Akluit* would be improved by a few additions that would also allow this excellent volume to stand on its own. The glossary found in *Yup'ik Elders* would be helpful to find the meanings of Yup'ik words not defined contiguously in the text for those not reading chronologically and for those using it as a language resource. Given the rich content within the extended transcriptions, an index would also be very useful, especially since discussions of particular objects broaden into varied subjects. Readers would also benefit from a more detailed explanation of the meaning and importance of "pioneering visual repatriation" found in the last chapter of *Yup'ik Elders*.

Yup'ik Elders begins with a forward by Museum curator Peter Bolz. He gives the history of the Museum's collection, including its foundation on the importance of material objects from non-literate societies as "manifestations of their *Völkergedanken* (a people's way of thinking)" (p. ix) and the egalitarian premise that material objects are of the same value as written documents, in contrast to the cultural evolutionism predominant at the time the collections were made. Bolz describes the Yup'ik project

as “a groundbreaking form of research for a European museum” that “could become a model for future museum research” (p. x).

In the preface, Fienup-Riordan gives a brief history of Jacobsen’s Yup’ik collection, including its fall into obscurity. She explains how the project developed and how the book’s structure, a gift exchange metaphor, was chosen to “highlight the positive reciprocal relations that characterized their work and to provide an alternative to the often contentious relations between the owners of objects and the Native descendants of their makers” (pp. xii-xiii), a purpose also stated in *Ciuliamta Akluit*. Fienup-Riordan describes the process of editing the transcripts at greater length than in *Ciuliamta Akluit*. This insight into managing such a vast amount of information is very useful and identifies priorities such as placing primary emphasis on the Native voice as the expert voice. Given that indigenous peoples today increasingly speak for themselves, Fienup-Riordan argues that instead of trying “to represent others,” the work of anthropology should be “to help understand how indigenous people present themselves,” the “creativity and inventiveness” of “the formation and re-formation of ethnic identity” that is “culturally constituted in the present and grounded in the past” (p. xv). She then proceeds to accomplish this work in the chapters that follow.

The first two sections of the book provide context for the collection and the project. In the first, “The Gift,” Fienup-Riordan gives extensive biographical information on Jacobsen. The detailed account of his acquisitions from Alaska and elsewhere contains numerous excerpts from archival materials, including Jacobsen’s descriptions of Native peoples he encountered. Also recounted is the great success accorded to his collections and the criticism against his deficient accession records. A brief description of the Yupiit and their land from the time of Jacobsen’s visit to today, including contemporary cultural reformation and community issues, is given in the second section called “The Gift-Givers.” This section lacks the more detailed language information presented in *Ciuliamta Akluit*.

The third section, “The Return Gift,” begins with a brief chapter on the project participants and time in Berlin. As with *Ciuliamta Akluit*, the subsequent chapters present chronologically work day discussions of objects within categories, excluding the last day. Entries on individual objects are comprised of transcript summaries with Yup’ik words, information from Jacobsen’s writings and English translations of transcript excerpts. The writing seamlessly interweaves the material in a conversational style that makes the text widely accessible. The author’s depth of knowledge of the objects and archival materials as well as the depth of her experience working with Native elders are manifest in the rich content. The numerous illustrations, appearing on nearly every page, are of the best quality and an engaging mix of objects shown in clear detail and elders explaining and joking during their research. Comparing the content of this section to *Ciuliamta Akluit*, one notices minor discrepancies, but this in no way detracts from it.

The final chapter of *Yup’ik Elders* is entitled “Visual Repatriation.” After describing the group’s working dynamics and experiences in Berlin, Fienup-Riordan substantiates the value of the project. The elders expressed gratitude that objects, which

would have disappeared, were collected and preserved, affording them the opportunity to re-connect with their rich heritage. They hope their work will inspire younger generations and address loss of traditional ways and cultural pride. Fienup-Riordan describes their work as “culturalism,” explained as “the process of self-conscious, deliberate use of identity, culture, and heritage in the struggle for recognition of a distinctive way of life,” which serves “to preserve and reproduce past practices and defend them against assimilative pressures” in order to shape a future where cultural distinctiveness is recognized and valued (pp. 287-288). She ends the chapter by discussing how criticism of museum practices led to Native collaboration in exhibit development and collections research. She points out the importance of recognizing that although the idea of collaboration is widespread, the quality of its yield varies. That is where the challenge is and where these two publications can serve as models of the highest standard. Fienup-Riordan also explains describing their work as “visual repatriation.” The elders’ goal was to reclaim knowledge and experiences not physical objects, bypassing physical repatriation issues. Her emphasis on the “profound benefits of Native access to collections for everyone involved” (p. 289) is an important lesson for museums and unquestionably proven within these pages.

What strikes this reviewer as missing from this otherwise thorough book is further discussion of repatriation beyond recognizing it as a “contentious” issue, especially since it is this unresolved situation that requires “visual repatriation.” Some readers may not be familiar with repatriation laws and issues in the U.S. or the fact that indigenous peoples have no legal recourse for reclaiming cultural heritage objects from European museums. Such a discussion would underscore the need to promote this type of project, particularly if European museums are reluctant to grant collections access to indigenous peoples for fear of repatriation demands, a fear held by the Berlin Museum staff according to Fienup-Riordan. It would also be worthwhile to acknowledge Yupiit who believe that the physical objects need to come home. Perhaps the author specifically chose not to discuss this subject in light of the present circumstances where “the bottom line is that today, Yup’ik patrimony remains in German hands” (p. 35), instead focusing on what can be accomplished now and on Native lives not objects.

Regardless of this reviewer’s concern over discussing repatriation, *Yup’ik Elders* and *Ciuliamta Akluit* present an inspiring, productive model for collaborative museum work, particularly as a constructive alternative to impediments created by reappropriation issues in Europe and elsewhere. Both books will be invaluable resources for all those whose work and/or interests include indigenous cultures and collections-based research. Fienup-Riordan clearly demonstrates the importance of bilingual research and the preeminent value of Native elders’ first person accounts of Native culture. Given the outcome of this collaborative project, she also convincingly promotes a mediating role for anthropologists as cross-cultural translators between emic and etic perspectives.